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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 007035

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PROP](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: OPEN BUT NOT TRANSPARENT: LOCAL REPORTERS
CRITICIZE 17TH PARTY CONGRESS MEDIA STRATEGY

REF: A. BEIJING 6606
[B](#). OSC CPP20071019968173

Classified By: Political Internal Unit Chief Dan
Kritenbrink. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Although the Communist Party employed a more sophisticated media strategy during the 17th Communist Party Congress October 15-21, local contacts tell us they were disappointed with the Party's tight regulation of domestic coverage while the Congress was in session. Press controls inside China were at least as severe, if not slightly more so, than during the 16th Party Congress in 2002. Although reporters this time were treated to more press conferences and granted greater access to meetings and delegates, journalists were given very little of substance to report. Caijing, a magazine known for cutting edge reporting, was denied press credentials altogether, according to one contact. Some sources tell us, however, that the Party leadership believes the improved treatment of foreign journalists resulted in more positive international coverage of the Congress. End summary.

Access Versus Substance

[1](#)2. (C) In the lead up to the 17th Communist Party Congress, Chinese official media trumpeted the unprecedented number of journalists, both foreign and domestic, who had received credentials to cover the event. Altogether, according to a Xinhua News Agency report, the Party accredited 807 domestic and 1,135 foreign reporters, compared with 570 domestic and 840 foreign journalists for the 16th Party Congress in [1](#)2002. Xinhua also boasted about the greater number of press conferences that took place on the margins of the Congress and the expanded ability of journalists to observe meetings and interview delegates. XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX

[1](#)3. (C) Local journalists generally agreed that while Party propaganda officials went through the motions of media openness, they offered reporters very little of substance. The "unprecedented" access to delegates, several contacts told us, amounted to little more than listening to a wider array of Party leaders robotically praise General Secretary Hu Jintao's political report. XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX told Poloff XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX that even though domestic journalists were granted entree to more meetings than at previous Party Congresses, the reporting they were actually allowed

to print was so restricted that the greater access did not result in better coverage. XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX (protect) told Poloff XXXXXXXXXXXX that he had originally wanted to skip covering the 17th Party Congress altogether. Domestic reporting of the Congress was "meaningless," XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX

Press Controls at Least As Tight As 2002

14. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXX that controls on domestic coverage of the 17th Party Congress were at least as tight, if not more so, than they were during the 16th Party Congress in 2002. The extent of these restrictions can be seen, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, in the nearly identical front pages Chinese newspapers printed October 23, the day after the Party unveiled the new nine-member Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC). Nearly every Chinese paper, XXXXXXXXXXXX observed, ran "Hu Jintao Elected General

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Secretary" as the top headline. The Southern

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Metropolis News (Nanfang Dushi Bao) was the only paper to push these limits by inserting some actual news into its October 23 headline: "Still Nine Standing Committee Members, Four Are New." Had Chinese journalists been allowed to report the unveiling of the new PBSC as a real news event, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, then the headlines would have been about the promotion of Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang directly to the PBSC thus bypassing the regular Politburo.

XXXXXXXXXXXX

15. (C) While several media contacts have said that press credentials for this latest Congress were easier to obtain than in the past (Ref A), at least one independent-minded publication was left in the cold. XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX

No Tears On CCTV

16. (C) China's domestic media took to heart Party guidance that news coverage remain upbeat and that negative stories should be avoided (Ref A). XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX told Poloff XXXXXXXXXXXX that some media outlets took these directives against negative news to extremes. XXXXXXXXXXXX said his friends at China Central Television (CCTV) told him that station managers had banned all "negative" images from the screen. During the Congress, CCTV would not show images of people crying, regardless of the circumstances. Even nature shows depicting animals stalking and killing prey were cut because such scenes were considered "inharmonious," XXXXXXXXXXXX said.

Party Happy With International Coverage

17. (C) Some contacts, however, said that the Party Congress media strategy of keeping journalists busy with press conferences and junkets (propaganda officials took foreign journalists to visit the newly constructed National Grand Theater as well as Olympic sites) was effective in terms of managing international coverage. Communist Party leaders, XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX said, are generally pleased with the international coverage of the Congress. Overall the international press was more positive than it was during 16th Party Congress in 2002, XXXXXXXXXXXX commented, with more focus on individual leaders and less on

factional infighting. XXXXXXXXXXXX said he gives the Party Congress Media Center a grade of "90 percent" for its management of the international press. XXXXXXXXXXXX agreed with XXXXXXXXXXXX that international reporting was more to the Party's liking than in 2002. While reporters for the Associated Press might have been upset with the lack of substance, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, reporters from the developing world were generally pleased with the cushy treatment they received.

Internet Controls and Baidu Hijacking

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18. (C) Contacts were nearly unanimous in their assessment that Internet controls were extremely tight during the Congress. Popular websites scrubbed their chat rooms of even the most mildly negative or sarcastic postings, several of our interlocutors told us. Numerous foreign media outlets reported that on October 18 Chinese Internet users conducting searches using Yahoo and Google were redirected to the Chinese search engine Baidu (Ref B). While many Beijing-based contacts had not heard of these reports, Embossos experienced this hijacking phenomenon first hand both in Beijing and in Chengdu. XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX (protect) told Poloff on XXXXXXXXXXXX that certain Google searches had indeed been rerouted. For example, typing in "Dalai Lama" would get you immediately rerouted to Baidu, with a message that "there is no information on your request." Most searches on Google, however, were not interfered with, XXXXXXXXXXXX said. XXXXXXXXXXXX told Poloff that Baidu has a bad reputation among journalists because of its alleged kowtowing to Chinese authorities. For example, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, a Baidu search of former Party Secretary Jiang Zemin reveals nothing but fawning news pieces. Baidu, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, actually gets more freedom because of its close relationship with the Chinese Government and thus is the best search engine for searches using Chinese characters. Google remains the best for English searches, XXXXXXXXXXXX said.

"Depressing" State of Press Freedom

19. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX told Poloff XXXXXXXXXXXX that the tight media controls surrounding the Congress were expected but "depressing" nonetheless. XXXXXXXXXXXX commented that no information about internal Party deliberations was revealed in the media and China's press was devoid of any real news during the Congress. "Even at the very end, nobody knew for sure if the Standing Committee would have nine or seven members," XXXXXXXXXXXX said, "why must all of this be kept so secret?" This information control has had a dampening effect on public and academic debate about policy directions China should take, XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX told Poloff XXXXXXXXXXXX that he and other liberal academics have had great difficulty in recent months publishing "sensitive" articles, particularly dealing with democracy and rule of law, as a result of the Congress. However, XXXXXXXXXXXX said that even though press controls remain tight, the Party has lost much of its ability to set the public agenda. The Communist Party can still control what is covered in the media, XXXXXXXXXXXX said, "but they cannot dictate what people care about." XXXXXXXXXXXX echoed this point, noting that the wider array of media options now makes it easier for Chinese to tune out Party Congress propaganda. "Rather than watch CCTV coverage of the Congress," XXXXXXXXXXXX said, "people can now just switch to one of the 60 other channels available."

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